

Russian Orthodox challenge plan to grant autonomy to church in Ukraine

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by [Vladimir Isachenkov](#) in the [October 24, 2018](#) issue

The Russian Orthodox Church warned that it would sever ties with the leader of the worldwide Orthodox community if he grants autonomy to Ukraine's Orthodox Church.

The stern warning followed Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I's promise to allow the Orthodox Church in Ukraine to be autocephalous, or ecclesiastically independent. The Russian church, the world's largest Orthodox communion, fiercely opposes the decision by Bartholomew, who is considered the "first among equals" of Orthodox leaders.

Moscow Patriarchate spokesman Vladimir Legoyda said it would "break the eucharistic communion" with the Istanbul-based Ecumenical Patriarchate if it makes the Ukrainian church autocephalous.

The church in Ukraine has been tied to the Moscow Patriarchate for hundreds of years, although many Ukrainian parishes have split off over the past two decades to form a schismatic church. Calls for independence have increased since Moscow's 2014 annexation of the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine.

Legoyda said the plans for autocephaly "threaten a fragile religious peace in Ukraine" and charged that they have been driven by "political ambitions of the Ukrainian leaders."

Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko, who is running for reelection next March, has pushed Bartholomew to grant independence to the Ukrainian church. His efforts received a fillip earlier this month when the Ecumenical Patriarchate announced that

it was sending two bishops to Ukraine as a step toward declaring ecclesiastical independence for the church there.

The Russian church responded by declaring that it would not participate in events headed by the Ecumenical Patriarchate and would not even remember Bartholomew in its prayers.

Nikolai Balashov, a deputy head of the Russian church's foreign relations department, pointed at the seizure of a church September 28 in the Ivano-Frankivsk region of western Ukraine by supporters of the Ukrainian church's autonomy as a sign of what might happen if Bartholomew grants it ecclesiastical independence.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church that is still part of the Moscow Patriarchate said right-wing radicals broke into Trinity Church in the Ukrainian village of Bohorodchany, beat up a priest and several others, and then drove believers away and locked up the building.

Regional police confirmed that two people were injured in a scuffle but denied any religious undertones, saying the clash was triggered by local authorities' decision to hand over a church building to a music school.

The Moscow Patriarchate said about 50 churches in western Ukraine have been seized by the schismatic church in similar attacks in recent years.

"It's a sad harbinger of possible tragic developments in Ukraine if government organs continue meddling in the church affairs in Ukraine," Balashov said. "If politics continue to intervene in the religious life, it could lead to tragic consequences across Ukraine." —Associated Press

**FOLLOWING UP (Updated January 7, 2019):** Epiphanius Dumenko, 39, was elected metropolitan of Kiev and all Ukraine, making him the first head of the newly unified Ukrainian Orthodox Church, European news sources reported. He was chosen December 15 in Kiev by a council on unification that brought together the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (which was under the Moscow Patriarchate), the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (under the Kiev Patriarchate), and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church.

Epiphanius welcomed Ukrainian priests who were connected to the Russian patriarch into the united church, according to news reports.

“We are ready to accept them with brotherly love, mutual respect, and to forget all of the grievances that have accumulated so far,” he said.

The Russian Orthodox Church broke off its relationship with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I after he granted autonomy to the Ukrainian churches. With the Russian church being the largest in the 300-million-member global Orthodox communion, some commenters called it the greatest schism in Orthodoxy since the 1054 separation from Catholicism, according to the BBC.

Bartholomew reversed a decision made in the 1600s that gave Moscow jurisdiction over the Kiev Metropolis, which currently numbers 12,000 Orthodox parishes in Ukraine, the BBC reported. The ecumenical patriarch also overturned the pronouncements of anathema that the Russian church made against two Ukrainian clergy who lead a previously unrecognized group of churches.

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